THE BOOK OF ASAPH: A JEWISH MEDICAL TEXTBOOK

The study of the medical history of ancient nations is plagued by a number of questions, historical, linguistic and conceptual, that stubbornly refuse to yield up their solutions. Despite all that we know of Greek medicine, for example, there is still debate among scholars as to which, if any, of the treatises in the Corpus Hippocraticum are the work of the master himself, and for all the exactitude and detail of Greek clinical descriptions, in both technical and non-technical literature, it is seldom possible to determine what illness is in question in such descriptions. So it is that debate still rages as to the identity of the Plague of Athens. The medical lore of the ancient Jews offers striking examples of this sort of apparently insoluble puzzle. Because Rabbinic physicians quoted in the Talmud seldom allude to external historical circumstances and quote medical colleagues who lived centuries before them as if they were their contemporaries, it is seldom possible to date the medical advances of the post-Biblical Jews as reflected in the Talmud with any degree of exactitude from the period 500 B.C. to A.D. 500.

One of the most challenging puzzles of ancient Jewish medical literature is posed by the Book of Medicines (Sefer Refuoth) attributed to one Asaph the Jew. a work which, despite its considerable length (it extends to 396 pages in its most complete manuscript), offers few obvious clues as to its authorship, date or place of composition. Yet evidence from language and content indicates that it is the earliest independent medical treatise in the Hebrew language, a distinction which renders the Sefer Refuoth worthy of the attention of historians of medicine. Still,

no complete critical edition of any manuscript of Asaph has ever been published, nor has a complete translation of the work appeared in any language. In this paper, we shall survey the difficulties which the Book of Medicines poses to the historian of medicine, and we shall argue that the treatise merits greater familiarity as a work which, while largely derived from classical Greek medical theory, transforms its sources into a uniquely Jewish medical document.

Since manuscripts of the Sefer Refuoth began to be uncovered in the nineteenth century, progress in the study of Asaph has been hampered by the same problem that has beset the study of the medical literature of other ancient nations: scholars who have tackled such texts have been either linguists or physicians, with neither group possessing adequate familiarity with the other necessary discipline. Consequently, it has been claimed on the one hand that Asaph is of interest solely as an illustration of a stage in the development of the Hebrew language, while on the other hand historians of medicine with no background in Semitic studies have frequently contented themselves with echoing the pronouncements of earlier researchers on Asaph. Scholars drew conclusions after partial examination of one or another manuscript of Asaph, and arrived at a date for the composition of the Sefer from evidence of orthography, the appearance of foreign words in the text, and scribal additions in the margins of manuscripts. On the basis of such a procedure, it was possible for one early student of the Munich manuscript to conclude that the author lived in the Eastern Roman Empire, for students of the Oxford manuscript to place him in Germany, for students of the Paris manuscript to argue that he was a Frenchman, and for one scholar to conclude that Asaph was really a Christian monk of the twelfth

century! The foremost pioneer of Asaph studies, the renowned bibliographer of medieval Hebrew translations, Moritz Steinschneider, argued already in 1850 that the Sefer Refuoth was a tenth- or eleventh-century translation of a lost Syriac work. His contemporary, Joseph Rappaport, countered that Asaph never lived at all, and that the work was merely a compilation of old Hebrew medical treatises. The name "Asaph," Rappaport contended, was simply a Hebraization of some Greek name, perhaps "Aesopus" (i.e., Aesop) or "Asclepius." The most extensive work yet devoted to Asaph was the study by Ludwig Venezianer, published between 1915 and 1917, in which portions of the work were translated into German and commented upon. Venezianer argued that Asaph was a historical personage living in Syria in the seventh century, and that he taught at a medical university. He used Greek as his professional language, according to Venezianer, but set out to improve upon his Greek sources by incorporating into his work insights derived from his own researches. An excellent Hebraist, Venezianer was no physician, and he came to be criticized for drawing conclusions on medical and botanical matters which he was not qualified to make. The first Jewish physician to turn his attention to Asaph, the Frenchman Isidore Simon, writing in the 1930's, knew little Hebrew, and he consequently depended largely upon Venezianer, agreeing with his conclusion that Asaph lived in the seventh century.

A final, significant chapter in modern Asaph studies was written in the 1950's and '60's by Süssman Muntner, a historian of medicine who combined training as a physician with skill as an Hebraist. Muntner collated all manuscripts of Asaph which he could locate, and concluded on the basis of his examination of Asaph's language that he lived in Palestine in

the sixth century, probably in Tiberias, a center of Jewish learning. Muntner was careful to distinguish Asaph from the Book of Asaph, which he regarded as a compilation containing additions made as late as the twelfth century as the work traveled from country to country as a textbook of medicine. The fact that the author of the work was termed "Asaph the Jew" suggested to Muntner that the work was used by non-Jews as well. Unfortunately, Muntner died before realizing his intention of producing a critical edition , translation and commentary on Asaph. Since Muntner's death, interest in Asaph and his work has waned.

The primary emphasis of scholarly investigation into the work of Asaph has been, as our brief survey of prior scholarship suggests, the determination of the authorship and date of composition of the work attributed to Asaph the Jew, while the medical content of the treatise has been largely a secondary consideration. While there has been general agreement among investigators that the Sefer Refuoth is indebted to Greek, and in particular Hippocratic originals, little analysis of the nature and use of such borrowings has been made. In the remainder of this paper, we shall examine some aspects of the medical content of the Sefer Refuoth as it reflects and deviates from Greek models. Such an approach may incidentally provide some clues to the questions of the date and authorship of the treatise.

The Sefer opens with a legendary account of the "history of ancient medicine," which recalls to the reader the opening sections of the Hippocratic treatise Ancient Medicine, although Asaph's treatment is considerably less abstract and speculative, for it is designed to demonstrate that Jewish medicine is a respectable entity in itself with a long history

and excellent credentials. The work purports to be a descendant of the so-called "Book of Medicines," occasionally alluded to in Jewish sources, which the angel Raphael is said to have dictated to Noah and which Noah in time passed on to his sons. These men shared their medical expertise with the sages of other nations, who translated the work into their own languages. Hence a knowledge of medicine passed to India, Mesopotamia and Egypt. In Macedonia, Asclepius studied the work, and in time Hippocrates became acquainted with its lore. From him, Dioscorides, Galen and Asaph learned. The fact that Asaph is listed as one of a succession of students of early Jewish medical lore in this fanciful history of medicine suggests that this part at least of the Sefer was not written by Asaph, for it would seem unlikely that Asaph would speak of himself in this impersonal manner. Indeed, there is evidence elsewhere in the work that some parts of it were taken down from dictation, perhaps by students attending class lectures, in the manner of some Aristotelian works. The formula "And I shall teach you," appearing at the beginning of successive sections of the work, lends support to this idea.

Following this quasi-historical introduction, Asaph states his thesis, which is repeated frequently throughout the work: that the body is put together of four elements, fire, water, air and earth. Health was seen as a harmonious blend of the warm, wet, cold and dry qualities which the elements represent, and sickness was felt to be a dominance of one of the elements over the others. The doctrine that the created world was subject to such a dominance of one quality over another had its origin in the teachings of such Pre-Socratic philosophers as Empedocles and Anaximander, and it appeared first as an explanation for

the aetiology of disease in the work of Alcmaeon of Croton, the contemporary of Pythagoras, who called disease a μοναρχία or dominance of one or another of these four qualities and health an ἰσονομία or balance of opposite qualities. Once the Hippocratics substituted fluids for these abstract qualities, their theory of humors (χυμοί) was born, a doctrine to which Asaph subscribed but which is otherwise virtually unknown in Jewish medical thought.

Asaph's theoretical introduction, in which he establishes his connections to both the Jewish and Greek medical traditions, is followed by a systematic and virtually complete survey of the branches of medicine, excepting surgery. The work ends in most manuscripts with an oath which Asaph is said to have required of the pupils who studied with him, a document which constitutes perhaps the most intriguing part of the treatise, both for its debt to the Hippocratic Oath and for its subtle deviations from it. It has sometimes been argued by scholars that Asaph's anatomy and physiology are totally derived from Greek sources, and that they betray no familiarity with the Rabbinic medicine of the Talmudic period (500 B.C.-A.D. 500), but this position is false. Asaph agrees with the Talmud that the human body contains 248 bones, and he accepts the peculiar Talmudic notion of the luz, the bone, apparently felt to be located in the back, from which the human being will be resurrected on the Day of Judgement. Moreover, he agrees with the Talmud that the human embryo is fully formed forty days after conception.

Greek influence is more apparent in Asaph's extended discussion (sections 19-43 in the Munich manuscript) of the influence of seasons, foods, waters and lands on human health, a passage which recalls the enormously

influential Hippocratic treatise Airs Waters Places. Asaph argues, as had the Hippocratic author, that certain winds and waters are preferable to others in promoting human health and even in fostering human intelligence. The climatological doctrine of the Hippocratics was a subtly xenophobic plea for the superiority of Europeans over Asians based on the supposed superiority of the varied European climate over the uniformly warm climate of Asia. Asaph controverts the Hippocratic position by contending that the superior drinking water, wines and climatic conditions of Palestine render it the most desirable part of the world. Here, as often in the Sefer, Asaph accepts a Greek doctrine but transforms it so that it becomes an article of Jewish medical lore. One is tempted, on the basis of Asaph's apparent familiarity with and obvious enthusiasm for Palestine to conclude, with Muntner, that he was at home there, but even the most casual study of medieval Jewish literature with Zionist leanings will show the danger of such a conclusion. One need only think of the ecstatic poems of the Spanish philosopher-physician Jehuda Halevi (ca. 1080-1140) in praise of Palestine, a land whose air, water and produce Halevi claimed excelled those of all other nations, although Halevy reached Palestine himself only in time to drop dead on the shore! Asaph's approach recalls rather such Rabbinic claims for the superiority of the climate of Palestine as we find in the Talmudic tractate Baba Batra 82b, wherein we read, "From this one may deduce that the climate of the land of Israel makes one wise." We may have here an instance of Asaph's borrowing of Talmudic notions rather than firm evidence on Asaph's biography.

What is important here is not the originality of Asaph's argument, which can be paralleled elsewhere in Jewish sources, but his tendency, in

adopting points of Greek medical theory, to acclimate them to a Jewish context by mingling with his Greek materials articles of Jewish faith: it is the Jewishness of his point of view which gives the work its particular interest as a medical document. For Asaph, medicine and religion are inseparable, and in his insistance upon combining articles of faith with elements of medical doctrine, Asaph places himself in sharp contrast to all other Jewish medical writers before the twelfth-century physician Maimonides. Asaph is unique in giving us a systematic presentation of medical doctrine in the light of Jewish ideas. It was an unwritten law among post-classical medical writers not to mingle religion and medicine, a law not broken by any Jewish medical writer until Maimonides in the twelfth century wrote his Aphorisms, a translation of the work of Hippocrates. The earliest datable Hebrew medical treatise, the work of the tenth-century Italian Donnolo, is merely a Hebrew-language treatise derived from Greek originals. Asaph's work is in a certain sense a throwback to the biblical and Talmudic attitude toward medicine, in which religion and medicine are regarded as essentially two sides of the same issue. Hence Asaph can believe not only in the validity of Greek humoral theory, but can argue that sin and prayer are potent forces in causing and dispelling disease, a notion familiar from biblical and Talmudic sources.

This same desire to establish a connection with the earlier stages of Jewish culture is seen as well in the archaizing manner of Asaph's language, and this may provide a clue to his date. Since he mentions Galen, he lived at least as early as the end of the second century A.D., which makes his use of biblical Hebrew a historically-outdated literary

affectation, somewhat in the manner of the use of literary Ionic in some of the later treatises in the Corpus Hippocraticum. Asaph's use of Hebrew forced him to coin many medical expressions, sometimes by combining as many as three Hebrew words into a new compound. In general he employs the biblical terms for medical plants, but at times he transliterates Greek and Latin terms. His work shows no familiarity with Arab medicine, in either vocabulary or content. Consequently, it may be possible to date some portions at least of the Sefer Refuoth to the period between the late second century and the ninth century, by which time knowledge of Arab medicine was widespread and could hardly be ignored by medical writers. Since Asaph is mentioned in a sequence of medical writers immediately after Dioscorides and Galen, with no intervening names or discussion, it may be that Asaph followed them chronologically rather closely, and that an earlier rather than a later date for the author is to be preferred.

The culmination of Asaph's work, in which a Greek original is reborn in a Jewish transformation, is reached in the Oath with which the Sefer Refuoth closes in some manuscripts. The debt of the oath to its Hippocratic antecedent is so obvious that even some historians of medicine who otherwise take no note of Asaph mention it. Even if we were to date the Sefer as late as the eleventh century, it would still be the earliest extant medical oath in Jewish literature. In addition, its mere presence in the treatise is somewhat surprising in view of the Rabbinic prohibition against unnecessary or superfluous oaths. The Rabbis felt that since every Jew has sworn an oath to the Torah, no additional oaths are required of Jews. A physician's duty to restore the health of his patients is viewed

as simply an aspect of his oath to the Torah.

The pious Jew believed, from antiquity, that the ability to heal rested solely with God, for He Himself said (Exodus 15:26), "For I am the Lord that healeth thee." Although some Jewish sages interpreted this as a prohibition against the practice of medicine by mortals, most Jews took this as divine sanction for men to practice healing, if only as agent's of God's will. It was therefore appropriate that a Jewish medical oath should reflect this sense of dependency upon the One God. We read therefore in Asaph, "Trust in the Lord your God, the God of truth, the living God, for He puts to death and brings to life. He smites and heals." One cannot fail to note a certain similarity to the opening of the Hippocratic Oath, in which Apollo the Physician, Asclepius, Hygieia and Panacea are invoked, but the spirit is in reality quite different in Asaph. The Greek divinities are merely called upon to witness the oath and there is no implication that they take part at all in the work of the physician. Indeed, since Hippocratic medicine fought to separate science from religion, the invocation of the gods in the Greek oath is a courteous formality. The Jewish oath, on the other hand, actively seeks the participation of God in the physician's work.

Asaph's conception of the proper behavior of the physician toward his patients, both in terms of personal demeanor and medical treatment, closely parallels that of the Hippocratics, but he shows a more generous spirit in his choice of patients than does the Greek author. "Take heed that you kill not any man with a root decoction," Asaph instructs. "Do not prepare any potion that may cause a woman who has conceived in adultery to miscarry; do not lust after beautiful women to commit adultery with them; and do not divulge a man's secret that he has confided in you." The Greek Oath instructs,

"Neither will I administer a potion to anybody when asked to do so, nor will I suggest such a course. Similarly, I will not give to a woman a pessary to cause abortion." Later in the Greek Oath, we read, "Into whatsoever houses I enter, I will enter to help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrong-doing and harm, especially from abusing the bodies of man or woman . . . ." Asaph, however, specifically enjoins his pupils to provide care for the poor, " . . . Do not harden your heart against the poor and the needy; rather have compassion upon them and heal them." This sense of charity is absent from the Greek Oath, and one has the sense that Hippocratic science was intended for an aristocratic clientele. Asaph, on the other hand, reflects a recognition of the Jewish commandment, incumbent upon all physicians, to heal the sick regardless of their ability to pay. The Talmud speaks at great length of this need for charity, on the grounds that God Himself healed the sick, so that surely a mortal can do no less.

The Jewish additions which Asaph makes to the framework of the Hippocratic Oath upon which he builds have the combined effect of shifting the moral position of the Greek oath in the direction of greater altruism. For all its exalted morality, the Hippocratic Oath betrays an underlying calculation and exclusivity which are foreign to the Jewish oath. The Hippocratic physician pledges to pass along his expertise to the family of his teachers, to his own family, and to those who have sworn the Oath--and to no others. His reward for carrying out the Oath is personal aggrandizement. "Now if I carry out this oath, and break it not," the Hippocratic physician prays, "may I gain for ever reputation among all men for my life and for my art." The rewards of the Asaphic physician are

viewed as largely spiritual, for high behavior on the part of Jewish physicians will inspire others to emulate their behavior and to exalt the God of Israel. "The Lord is with you when you are with Him," Asaph instructs, "and if you keep His covenant and walk in His statutes and cleave unto them you shall be as saints in the eyes of all flesh, for they will say 'Happy is the people that is in such a state; happy is the people whose God is the Lord.'"

Investigation of Asaph's Sefer Refuoth seems doomed to raise more questions than it solves. It may be the case that real progress in understanding the treatise will require careful investigation of Mesopotamian and Indian medical literature, to which the Sefer bears some structural resemblance. Our brief survey of some features of the treatise which distinguish it from other pre-Maimonidean Jewish medical works suggests that Asaph may have intended his work for more than medical instruction. The medical-historical introduction to the work, in which the Jewish contribution to medicine is stressed, the use of Hebrew, a language familiar to Jewish scholars everywhere in the Diaspora, whatever their vernacular, and the radical transformation of the Hippocratic Oath with which the Sefer culminates, all suggest that the Sefer Refuoth may have been intended as an apology for Jewish learning as an entity equal in value to pagan learning and not less as an inspiration to Jewish proselytes living in the Diaspora, where Jews frequently found themselves and their culture scorned. This would account for the strong case made in the Oath for the potential of Jewish science and morality to inspire a non-Jewish audience, and for the flattering portrayal elsewhere of the excellences of Palestine. Whatever the answers to the puzzles posed by the work of Asaph, the ardent love for

the faith of Israel, which warms the borrowed science of the treatise, is unmistakable and may in time inspire scholars to undertake once again to rescue the book of Asaph from the obscurity into which it has fallen.

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